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Substantive questions

Development of United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity: design and scope of a pilot project

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 32 of resolution 53/59 B of 3 December 1998, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General "to submit a report on the design and scope of the pilot project regarding United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity, which would be considered by the Committee on Information at its twenty-first session in 1999".

2. In paragraph 33 of the same resolution, the General Assembly noted, "in that context, that the Department of Public Information intend[ed] to contact Member States in order to ascertain their preparedness to provide technical facilities for the pilot project and to include that information in the report mentioned in paragraph 32 above".

3. The Department of Public Information has conducted research and consulted with a number of regional and international radio broadcasting organizations on trends in national and international broadcasting, the most suitable programme design for target regions in different languages and the most cost-effective means for the timely delivery of United Nations radio programming to national and regional audiences.

4. In the limited time available between the adoption of resolution 53/59 B and the preparation of the present report, a number of Member States [illegible]regional groups were also contacted, as provided for in the resolution. They were unable to make a commitment regarding broadcasting facilities for the pilot project without consultation with their respective broadcasting organizations. Since the determination of the availability of broadcasting facilities required information of a technical nature, the Department of Public Information prepared a questionnaire for circulation to major broadcasting organizations that have the appropriate facilities in different regions. At its meeting held on 11 February 1999, the Bureau of the Committee on Information expressed the view that there was not enough time to circulate the questionnaire, receive and analyse the responses and include the results in the present report in a timely manner. The Bureau agreed, therefore, that the report should be prepared in time for the twenty-first session and that the questionnaire should be circulated at a later date.

5. The Department has reviewed United Nations radio programme production in different languages, as well as distribution patterns, in order to determine the effectiveness of programme dissemination and rebroadcasting. The review took into consideration the current formats of programme output in the light of the various options offered by emerging

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new telecommunications technologies, including the digital audio broadcasting and Web casting on the Internet. Staff production resources, technical facilities and operational funds were also reviewed to determine how they could be adapted to the requirements of the pilot project.

6. The process of research and consultation has revealed the complexity of the task of designing multiple programme formats in different languages for broadcasting to audiences in disparate geographical regions with distinct listening habits, using a variety of dissemination technologies. The sparse resources currently available in the Department for this purpose are another key consideration. In addition, new trends in the broadcast industry, coupled with fast-developing new communications technologies present challenges and offer opportunities for the project under review.

II. The current broadcasting environment

7. Recent structural and technological developments in the global radio broadcasting industry are setting new market trends. In several regions, deregulation and the breakup of State-run superstations have led to fragmentation and the growth of a large number of immensely popular independent radio stations. While, in some regions, State-owned corporations still control technical and transmission facilities, there is an explosion in the number of private FM radio stations that command a respectable following. The collective outreach and impact of these radio stations on local audiences worldwide has been recognized by traditional leaders of shortwave broadcasting. Shortwave broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service, the Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and Radio France Internationale, are making airtime lease or sharing arrangements with local and national broadcasting organizations in developing countries to rebroadcast their programmes to local audiences. These arrangements have enhanced the impact of shortwave broadcasters, by giving their programming a local flavour. This is not to say that major international broadcasters are relinquishing the medium of shortwave broadcasting. The BBC World Service still claims a total of some 132 million listeners worldwide on shortwave, while the Voice of America's shortwave audiences are estimated at 86 million.

8. Technological innovations in the radio broadcasting industry are enhancing the spectrum, improving sound quality and adding hundreds of channels and multiple choices for larger audiences. Digital audio broadcasting, which is already being tested, will increase the range of channels available to listeners and will deliver radio programmes in compact disc quality over longer distances. It will also achieve significant savings in transmission costs. Direct satellite broadcasting is a revolutionary radio technology that could transform the whole industry. The Washington-based WorldSpace Corporation, which is the pioneer in the new technology of direct station-to-satellite-to-receiver broadcasting, launched its first direct broadcast satellite, AfriStar, in October 1998. AfriStar, which targets Africa and the Middle East, was expected to become operational in April 1999. Two more satellites, AsiaStar and AmeriStar, are scheduled to be launched before the end of the decade and will broadcast to Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. WorldSpace estimates that, when fully operational, its network of direct satellite broadcasting will cover more than 4.6 billion people in the developing world with "socially responsible" programming. It envisages delivering compact disc-quality programmes through hundreds of satellite channels.

9. The use of the Internet as a multimedia vehicle for the dissemination of information is gaining rapid popularity. For radio purposes, the Internet is demonstrating its versatility as a medium for the delivery of programming that serves the needs of a newly emerging constituency of users. In North America alone, more than 2,000 radio stations use the Internet for Web casting, in addition to their regular AM and FM channels. However, the reliability of the Internet as a broadcast medium is contingent on further technological developments to enhance the bandwidth, and also on its broad availability in developing countries.

10. The Department is making strenuous efforts to harness and deploy various aspects of the new communications technology described above in its pursuit of quicker, higher-quality dissemination of the radio material that it offers. The development of a United Nations international radio capacity is one of the important ingredients of the Department's broad-based drive for technological innovation.

III. Pilot broadcasting project

11. The design and scope of the Department's pilot broadcasting project link four main components: production capacity, linguistic diversity, telecommunications technology and target audiences. Taking into consideration the available levels of production resources and the multiple choices offered by new and emerging telecommunications technologies, the design and scope of the pilot project is predicated on the following factors:

(a) The need to maintain and, where possible, enhance the current levels of programme production and delivery in the six official languages of the Organization to all recipient regions;

(b) The need to use all available telecommunications technologies, including shortwave, digital audio broadcasting via satellite and the Internet, for programme delivery, depending on the feasibility, availability and effectiveness of each technology in the respective target region;

(c) The availability of public and private broadcasters in each region and country willing to provide airtime for United Nations radio programmes on the basis of a regular schedule;

(d) The importance of increasing the frequency of the delivery of programmes to national, regional and international audiences, preferably on the basis of a daily schedule, where feasible;

(e) The need to streamline radio programme output and to reorient production resources towards more frequent direct broadcasting, which would reduce dependency on the pattern of tape programme distribution;

(f) The need to supplement limited production and transmission resources to enable United Nations Radio to cope with the increasing demand for broadcast radio information about the activities of the United Nations and the organizations of the common system;

(g) The need to pre-position additional resources to backstop radio broadcasting in peacekeeping operations, where radio is deemed a primary source of information.

12. Based on the foregoing considerations, including linguistic multiplicity and the diversity of available broadcasting technologies, the design of the proposed pilot project would seek to provide the following services:

(a) A daily package of a 5- to 15-minute duration, consisting of news, interviews and features for broadcast to national and regional audiences in countries and regions where airtime may be made available for this purpose. This will be determined by the results of a questionnaire that has been prepared by the Department of Public Information to gauge the interest of Member States and their national broadcasting systems;

(b) Weekly regional magazines (10- to 15-minute duration) focusing on issues, activities and personalities of exclusive regional interest. This would also integrate contributions from the organizations of the common system, reflecting their projects and field activities;

(c) Special news bulletins covering meetings of the Security Council and the General Assembly that are of particular interest to specific countries and regions. This would also include transmission of statements of interest to national and regional audiences for rebroadcast by relevant radio stations;

(d) Feature programme series on core issues of interest to national, regional and international audiences. This may include co-production projects with national and international broadcasters.

13. The scope of programme distribution/rebroadcasting will cover regions where the six official languages of the Organization are used as principal languages, and to the extent that effective broadcasting facilities are made available on a scheduled basis. In this respect, the pilot broadcasting project will endeavour to use the most effective radio delivery system available in the target region. This will include shortwave, AM/FM and satellite distribution for rebroadcasting. Electronic audio file transfer, for example, is now being used to deliver Chinese language programmes to rebroadcasting stations in China and in the United States of America.

14. The duration of the pilot project would be one year in two six-month periods, to be followed by an evaluation. The main objective of the pilot project would be the improvement of the current pattern of programme distribution and placement.

15. Programme design and frequency of delivery may be adapted to the schedule of a major carrier that covers significant population density in a single official language. In this case, components outlined in the programme design in paragraph 12 above may be combined or redesigned to suit the broadcast schedule of a given network.

IV. Telecommunications technology

16. Available broadcasting technology will determine the mode and frequency of transmission to each target region. This takes into consideration the fact that global radio broadcasting is undergoing a transition to new technologies, such as digital audio broadcasting, direct satellite broadcasting and the Internet.

17. Research data indicate that a combination of shortwave and satellite distribution for national and regional broadcasting would enable United Nations Radio to cover Africa with daily programme packages in English and French. This would be done by entering into rebroadcasting arrangements with a number of regional and international

broadcasting organizations. The same English programme design would be made available in Asia, excluding countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and China. Broadcasting facilities would be negotiated with national and regional broadcasting institutions with which United Nations Radio has rebroadcasting arrangements.

18. In Latin America, the rapid evolution of technology is transforming the broadcast industry on an unprecedented scale. Daily telephone news feeds and electronic audio file transfer through the Internet, as well as the delivery of weekly magazine programmes to individual FM radio stations and to major networks broadcasting on AM and shortwave, would be the backbone of programme design and mode of transmission for both Portuguese and Spanish language programmes. Programme content and media of transmission would consistently take advantage of the fast-paced developments in new technologies in the region as they evolve. A gradual expansion and diversification of programming is envisioned as more and more stations embrace the Internet as a communications and Web casting medium. Satellite distribution for rebroadcasting would be pursued as it develops. Tape programme distribution would be reviewed and scaled down as a growing number of stations develop the capacity for timely reception and rebroadcast of United Nations radio programmes.

19. In the Caribbean, where shortwave listening habits are extremely limited, arrangements would be made with the Caribbean News Agency and broadcasting institutions for satellite distribution to interested broadcasters of a daily programme, led by a Caribbean-specific segment. The pilot project would take advantage of Internet technology as it develops in the region. Endeavours are being made to attract new AM and FM stations that may be interested in timely news packages through audio streaming technology on the Internet. Tape programme distribution would be reviewed.

20. Arrangements would be made to redesign Russian programme production into more frequent news and feature packages, to be prepared for rebroadcast several times a week, targeting audiences in the Russian-speaking regions. Modes of transmission would include both shortwave broadcasting and satellite distribution. New and emerging FM stations which can access the Internet would be provided with the same packages in electronic file format for rebroadcasting. Transmission emphasis would shift to the Internet wherever it becomes available. Shortwave and other broadcasting facilities are being sought from countries of the region.

21. The main target region for programme production in Chinese is China. Under long-term arrangements, two major broadcasting organizations, China National Radio and China Radio International, receive and rebroadcast United Nations radio programmes on a regular basis. Recently, both networks, as well as Radio and Television Hong Kong, have begun receiving transmissions of United Nations radio programmes through the medium of electronic file transfer, with excellent results. Radio programmes in Chinese are also hosted on the Web site of a New Jersey-based private communications corporation, Infinity Interactive, Inc. Consultations are under way with the two major broadcasters in China on a new programme design.

22. Arabic language radio programmes are transmitted to broadcasting organizations in the Middle East by telephone, via radio circuit and on tape. There is already expressed interest from Radio Cairo, which transmits United Nations radio programmes on medium and shortwave to the Middle East and Africa, to provide airtime on a regular basis four times per week for United Nations radio programmes. Similar expressions of interest from major broadcasting organizations in the region could expand the range of programme dissemination. Electronic audio file transfer technology is also being explored to ensure more timely delivery of news and current affairs programmes.

V. Conclusions

23. A small-scale pilot programme in connection with the Department's direct international radio broadcasting project could be launched in the six official languages for rebroadcast in all linguistic target regions for a period of one year. It would seek to test the technical feasibility, programming capacity, resource requirements and listeners' interest for the purposes of the development of a United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity.

24. In view of the need for linguistic diversity, and with due consideration of resource constraints, diverse telecommunications technologies and availability of timely rebroadcasting facilities, programme design and frequency of delivery may vary from region to region. The overall emphasis would be on the production and delivery of timely news packages and current affairs programmes on a daily and weekly basis to wider audiences, using more effective modes of transmission, including satellite distribution and the Internet.

25. For the pilot project, staff and technical production resources, programme formats and modes of transmission would be adapted to ensure timely and more frequent delivery of programmes. This may include streamlining of programme production and scaling down tape programme distribution.

26. The successful implementation of the pilot and, to the same extent, of the direct international radio broadcasting project itself, will depend upon the support of Member States that have national or international radio broadcasting or distribution systems where airtime could be made available to United Nations Radio for broadcast of its programmes.

27. The pilot project, as described above, is designed to test the technical feasibility, programming capacity and listeners' interest in a United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity. However, as indicated in chapter I above, no concrete commitment has yet been made by any Member State or broadcast organization to provide the technical facilities needed for this pilot project. Similarly, no Member State or institution has responded to the request by the Secretary-General contained in his report on the development of United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity (A/AC.198/1998/4) to contribute resources for the development of such a capacity. In view of this, and of the scale of extrabudgetary resources needed for the main project (approximately 4 million United States dollars per year for the next several years), the Department of Public Information does not plan to initiate the complex and demanding pilot project until there are clear indications from Member States and others of the availability of the resources required. In the meantime, the Department will continue to harness all affordable aspects of technological innovation in the ongoing modernization of United Nations Radio.